



A NEW



GREEN LANTERN

HOPE

After Batman, Superman and Wonder Woman, willpower-wielding cosmic cop Green Lantern is DC's biggest hero. But can we take him seriously on the big screen?

WORDS IAN NATHAN

GREEN LANTERN

BRIEFING GREEN LANTERN

Released: June 16
Budget: \$200 million (estimated)
Director: Martin Campbell
Starring: Ryan Reynolds, Blake Lively, Peter Sarsgaard, Mark Strong, Tim Robbins
Story: When bequeathed a superpower-giving ring by a dying alien, cocky test pilot Hal Jordan (Reynolds) is unexpectedly drafted into the Green Lantern Corps, an intergalactic police force currently tackling the deadly Parallax entity.
Based on: The DC Comics character who first appeared in July 1940 – although this movie version is based on his “Silver Age” revival incarnation in 1959.

BEFORE RYAN REYNOLDS, THERE WAS JACK BLACK. A SLACKER SUPERHERO, IN THE VEIN OF *THE MASK*, WHO COULD INFLATE HIS FEATURES LOONEY TUNES-STYLE TO DEFEAT BAD GUYS,

before exposing the jelly of his midriff and proclaiming his awesomeness. At this stage in the film’s development, Warner Bros., parent of DC Comics, wasn’t taking the hero seriously. “It was going to be a comic take on the character,” boasted Black, proclaiming his obviousness. This was, to be fair, before *Batman* Began again and Marvel mined its catalogue of heroes for healthy returns, when Jack Black could open a movie. Things have changed.

It’s May 2010, and hot as a bastard in old New Orleans. After the catastrophic deluge of Katrina swallowed so much of the city, Hollywood has been doing its bit, bringing massive productions and welcome revenue to the region: *Drive Angry*, *The Expendables*, aliens vs. sailors showboat *Battleship*.

For now, *Green Lantern* is in town. And fictionally speaking, the Cajun capital is Coast City, another of those descriptors characteristic of DC’s comic-book America, like Metropolis, Smallville or Aquaman’s Sub Diego. Hiding in an unassuming building in the Garden District are the production offices. With a night shoot ahead, it’s our first port of call: director Martin Campbell is taking a few design meetings before moving on to the set. Here, at least, he’ll have some headspace to answer questions — happiest in the thick of physical production, we won’t get near him once the cameras are rolling. Later that night, true to his reputation, the Kiwi director is to be seen bellowing through a PA system to simulate a CG helicopter crashing into a party. A throng of extras screeches in panic at every “BOOM”. FYI: the helicopter is being tossed by the telekinetic powers of Hector Hammond, Peter Sarsgaard’s evil scientist with a horribly engorged cranium.

Ring of power: Hal Jordan (Ryan Reynolds) prepares to get supered-up.

“You’ve got to treat this seriously, as if you were doing Shakespeare really,” says Campbell, straight as a die. There’s not an atom of geekiness in the director. “Technically it’s very different, but I approach it with the same seriousness as I would approach *Hamlet*. If I ever did one.”

IT’S A MISSION STATEMENT, OF SORTS. CAMPBELL IS TAKING THIS SUPERHERO BUSINESS AS SERIOUSLY AS CHRISTOPHER NOLAN, EXCEPT *GREEN LANTERN* PRESENTS A LIVELIER CHALLENGE THAN THE BERGMANESQUE

grumblings of Gotham. *Green Lantern* isn’t one hero, but an entire intergalactic police force based out of Planet Oa, populated with all manner of alien supers, as if the Jedi ditched their judo suits for green spandex and a hippidy-hop ring able to channel the emerald-hued willpower of the universe.

Given all of this was created by DC Comics staffer Bill Finger in 1940 — another of those unstoppable moral bodies dreamed up to figuratively fight off the Nazis or the Commies at the height of comic-book fervour — it’s fair to say that *Star Wars* owes more to *Green Lantern* than vice versa.



Hal Jordan with love interest Carol Ferris (Blake Lively).

Finger’s idea was a fusion of Superman with Aladdin, a superhero with limitless wishes from a magic lamp.

Where does Ryan Reynolds figure in all of this? Hal Jordan is the answer, an Earthling test pilot hewing to the Maverick mould: big grin, great shoulders, preppy good looks. “He’s the guy that has it all,” says Reynolds when *Empire* finds him later that evening in an aircraft hangar doubling as a mess hall for film crew, dressed in a grey wetsuit dotted in ping-pong balls. “He’s very cocky, kind of a loudmouth, never been part of anything, and this great extra-terrestrial power finds him and he can’t really figure out why.” By tradition, Jordan was modelled on Paul Newman.

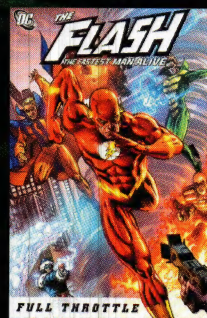
He’s given a Green Lantern ring by a dying alien with a wacky name who crash lands on DC-Earth, having run into trouble with Parallax (we’ll come to that). Thus, unwittingly, and with no short supply of wisecracks, he is the first human inducted into the Green Lantern force. “The ring never makes a mistake,” adds Reynolds, who has *so* boned up on this stuff. “It chooses someone for a very specific reason, and those reasons are never wrong.” The Lantern team back on Oa remain sceptical.

Campbell, renowned for refreshing the Bond and Zorro franchises with grit and wit, accepted the mission, written by Greg Berlanti, because he hadn’t “done a superhero movie yet”. He hadn’t even heard of *Green Lantern*, growing up in a post-War New Zealand that got as far as Superman, Batman

Mark Strong as Lantern leader Sinestro. Nothing suspicious about him, then...

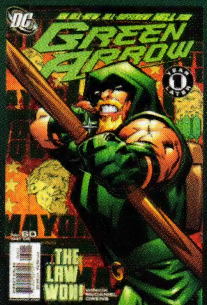
CAPES OF GOOD HOPE

After *Green Lantern*, which other DC heroes are yearning for big-screen adventures?



THE FLASH

Real name: Barry Allen
Powers: He jogs along at supersonic speeds, and even super-speed-reads. Take that, *War And Peace*! **Movie?** As of last winter Warner Bros. had hired *Green Lantern* writers Greg Berlanti, Michael Green and Marc Guggenheim to work out a script based on Geoff Johns's recent comic run.



GREEN ARROW

Real name: Oliver Queen
Powers: He can do anything with a bow. He favours trick arrows including those loaded with glue, nets, Kryptonite or even a boxing glove. Also notable among DC heroes for his leftish politics. **Movie?** *Batman Begins* co-writer David S. Goyer attempted a film in 2008, with a plot that saw Queen framed and sent to a super-prison he then had to escape. But it's gone quiet, and given potential confusion with *Green Lantern*, don't hold your breath. >

"YOU MUST APPROACH IT AS IF IT WERE SHAKESPEARE." MARTIN CAMPBELL

and Donald Duck, but he liked what he read: "He's a much more complex character than most of them. It's all to do with the most unlikely character in the world to be chosen as a Green Lantern." Although, not quite as unlikely as Jack Black.

There are, in splendid Two-Face fashion, two sides to this comic-book coin. On one side space-opera — Hal will zoom to Oa to be trained by Sinestro, the red-skinned sergeant-major of the Green Lantern Corps with an extra-large forehead, and played by Mark Strong. On the other, back on Earth, he's dealing with the death of his father and a general lack of maturity. Neurotic superhero DNA shared with Superman, Batman, Spider-Man and the entire panoply of hung-up do-gooders.

"It really walks a tightrope," thinks Reynolds of the film's mix of tones. "You can't do a movie like this in the tone of *Dark Knight*. Jordan has tremendous wit, but should never really be funny." Deep down, he is a troubled dude. Beneath the cocksure pilot veneer, it's total insecurity. Fear is his Kryptonite. There are edges to his adventure, the fights will be "ugly and nasty" according to the star. And Jordan is still to get the girl. As in Carol Ferris, played — lovely cranium unexpanded — by Blake Lively, who will one day become Star Sapphire (but let's not get ahead of ourselves).

"Carol runs a company, she owns this business, and she's also a fighter pilot," shoots Lively. In short, she's Lois Lane with her own F-16. Lively is a real livewire. She's clearly having a ball. And although previously unversed in *Green Lantern* — take a bow, Wikipedia — the *Gossip Girl* star certainly has her part of the equation down pat: "Their relationship is push and pull. Very competitive: they're two of the best fighter pilots in the world. They've grown up together. Her father runs the company that his dad worked for. His dad died under her father's watch. There's a lot of obstacles, but they're very much in love." According to the film's thematic spectrum, if willpower is green, then love is violet. FYI: Carol was modelled on Liz Taylor.

WITH ITS JUNE 16, 2011, RELEASE DATE, *GREEN LANTERN* HAD ONE SHOT AT COMIC-CON, THE HOTBED OF SUPERHERO APPRAISAL CONSIDERED AN ESSENTIAL TRIAL-BY-GEEK FOR ANY

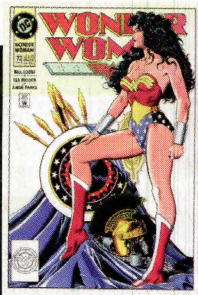
potential franchise. Thus the shoot was put on hold while Campbell, Reynolds, Lively, Sarsgaard and Mark Strong (who hadn't shot a scene yet) showed a snatch of footage and Q&A'd at a panel. To accompany the event, American magazine *Entertainment Weekly* had run a risky cover of Reynolds in full costume. The image, a long way from ready, was widely scorned. And while the panel went well, with a goggle-eyed tween joining Reynolds on stage for a rendition of Green Lantern's famous oath ("In brightest day, in blackest night..."), the sun-starved adjudicators of Hall H shuffled out like a herd of *Simpsons*' Comic Book Guys citing: An. Overall. Lack. Of. Awesomeness.

Green Lantern was burned by Comic-Con. In Campbell and Warner's defence, the footage was raw; they were still in the midst of the shoot, let alone post-production. The material was hardly representative, but suddenly they were going uphill.

"If you don't deliver what they're expecting, they'll feel a little peeved," says Mark Strong with a shake of his head; it was his first Comic-Con and he hadn't been prepared for the religious devotion. "All it was ever intended to be was a flavour. I think the panel went really well, we held our own, especially as the Marvel team were parading *The Avengers*. You know what I mean? Six or seven A-list actors up on stage."

Warner Bros. has a lot at stake in *Green Lantern*. Not just a rumoured \$200 million budget — this marks its first full-blooded attempt to launch a new superhero franchise from the DC canon alongside the endlessly rebootable double act of Batman and Superman. Here, in business terms, is a chance for DC to rival Marvel's extensive family of lucrative comic-book movies. The equivalent of an Iron Man — a second-tier hero made A-list, and the launching pad for any number of future DC adaptations.>

GREEN LANTERN

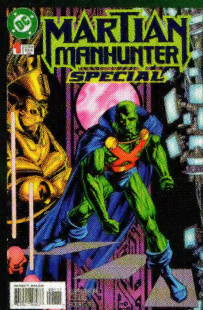


WONDER WOMAN

Real name: Princess Diana of Themyscira

Powers: Super-strong, super-fast, super-intelligent, has a lasso that makes you tell the truth...

Movie? It's spent years in development hell, but there'll soon be a David E. Kelley TV series.



MARTIAN MANHUNTER

Real name: J'onn J'onzz

Powers: He's invulnerable, able to fly and a great detective. Also has telekinesis, telepathy and regenerative abilities.

Movie? There has been no sign, but he's likely to be a part of any possible Justice League movie.



SWAMP THING

Real name: Swamp Thing

Powers: A plant elemental, Swamp Thing can inhabit and animate any vegetable matter.

Movie? There was a Wes Craven *Swamp Thing* film made in 1982, but after its 1989 sequel failed to make an impact, it's been on the compost heap ever since.

HELEN O'HARA

"DC and Marvel are all thundering ahead with as much as they can churn out," says Campbell, determined not to burden himself with the bigger picture. "Like with *Iron Man* and so forth, and of course the *Justice League* [movie] that was almost made. It really has to be good when they do make something that involves superheroes." You get one shot, or it's 10 years in reboot limbo. What Campbell does want to make clear, on behalf of himself and Christopher Nolan, is that DC is a non-connected universe. You won't catch an Easter-egging Christian Bale as Bruce Wayne dropping by at the end-of-credits.

"Presumably, I should be feeling the pressure," says Reynolds thoughtfully of heading up his own franchise, "but you get so lost in the work that stuff melts away. Despite the fact that this is a mega-budget space epic, there's a lot of play on set."

For the filmmakers and crew, just dealing with *Green Lantern's* special effects requirements is challenge enough. Campbell, a proponent of keeping it real, has kept as much of the film's action in-camera as possible: tight, dirty fights; a sense of Jordan taking a punch. "He gets hurt," grimaces Reynolds. But if Zorro and 007 had their share of computer tweaking, here CGI is painting half the scenery, granting the lead character flight or a giant, ghostly green fist manifested through his ring (a "construct"; we'll come to these), as well as an entire cantina of aliens. There are 1300 effects shots in all.

"They're a pain in the arse, to be honest," sighs Campbell. "There is nothing duller than standing next to bluescreen, I can tell you."

While in New Orleans, *Empire* is given a tour of production designer Grant Major's makeshift studio. Major, a veteran of *The Lord Of The Rings*, has that particularly Kiwi quality of sceptical enthusiasm — you get the pros, you get the cons. Yet the pictures are fabulous, intricately detailed tableaux of Oa: a trippy Middle-earth of cathedral-spined cities and H.R. Giger rock formations. It has a promising alt-universe feel that could give *Green Lantern* an atmosphere entirely its own among the millionaire mansions of the superhero landscape.

"*Green Lantern* is limitless in terms of the different characters and the setting," says Campbell. "This is outer space." According to estimates of its comic-book heritage, there have been 3600 Lanterns, and a whole universe of potential villains to keep in line.

On one wall is a delightful scale comparison of the intergalactic policemen that will feature, however slightly, in this first movie. Standing out in the menagerie are Kilowog (a hulking, Chewbacca-like officer), Tomar-Re (a fish-headed scientist, not unlike Abe Sapien from *Hellboy*) and the miniscule Bzzd (ostensibly a wasp in a green suit). *Hellboy* makes for a good comparison: that glut of extraordinary beings.

Of all the bad vibes to emerge from Comic-Con, it was Jordan's suit that stirred most negativity. Arguably the film's most ambitious idea, his suit will be entirely CG. No phone box required: when Jordan dons the ring, the suit emerges from within him, a gossamer-thin green skin flowing over the contours of Reynolds's über-puffed body. "It had to be virtual rather than spandex," insists the star. "This is a suit from an alien planet."

It's a tough ask of an actor, removing the crutch of his costume. For his hero scenes, Reynolds wears this sensor suit. "It's not *The Dark Knight* — I don't put the suit on and my voice drops several octaves," says Reynolds, unfazed by the absence of green tights. "The suit is powered specifically on his will, his emotion, his creativity and his imagination. I love that."

Which brings us to the "constructs", as Campbell calls them. The manifestation of the Green Lanterns' superpower. In another of the pictures on Major's wall, a vortex of green energy cascades heavenwards — this is Oa harnessing the universe's willpower, to be stored in exotic lanterns and unleashed through those signature rings. The Lantern warrior then uses his mind to shape it into "constructs", be they fists or swords or anything, all made from pea-green CG. "Everything Hal creates are images from his childhood," explains Reynolds, "or things fuelled specifically from his own mind." This supposedly is where the Jack Black concept made hay as he manifested supersized hotdogs and electric guitars.

And Parallax? Well, if willpower is green, and love violet, then fear is yellow. Parallax is a big bundle of fear floating around the galaxy causing mayhem, that has turned its yellow tendrils towards Earth. Deep inside is a former Guardian gone

"THE SUIT HAD TO BE VIRTUAL, NOT SPANDEX — IT'S FROM AN ALIEN PLANET!" RYAN REYNOLDS

Something fishy: Green Lantern Corps member Tomar-Re welcomes us to Lantern HQ, Planet Oa.



Peter Sarsgaard's Hector Hammond: "Who you calling big-head?"



bad (they're like the Yodas of Oa). One strand of lemon has infected Hector, causing his gigantic head and violent mood swings. "He becomes Parallax's disciple," Campbell announces, as if reading the news.

A MONTH AFTER COMIC-CON, EMPIRE IS BACK IN THE BIG EASY. IN THE FULL GLARE OF THE SUN THE TEMPERATURE IS TOPPING 38 DEGREES AND IT'S NOT EVEN 9AM YET. IT'S BEEN A TOUGH SHOOT IN THAT

respect — Sarsgaard's head has been prone to non-scripted "melting". Mark Strong has finally joined the production for the Oa stage of the movie, heavy on bluescreen.

Right now, via the medium of glorious, old-fashioned make-up, Strong is being transformed into Sinestro — a rough four hours in the chair every day. The stalwart British actor is upgrading his rep as the go-to scoundrel by cornering the market in godlike aliens. "Basically I've been doing this for 25 years, never played an alien, and like buses, two of them come at once," he laughs, as his handsome cranium is dabbed with alcohol.

Last year he assayed Matai Shang in Andrew Stanton's even more CG-heavy *John Carter Of Mars*, not due until 2012. "Like all characters you have to draw from within to make them realistic," says Strong, a deep lobster complexion forming on his cheeks. "People have to relate to them." But while Matai Shang is an enigmatic overlord hovering above the world of the film, Sinestro is much more physical, much more dynamic. "It's all about protecting the universe. There's also a kind of arrogance about Sinestro."

If you know your Lantern lore, a future Sinestro, drunk with power, will curdle into corruption. For this first movie, he's merely an icy police chief: Spock meets Zod, disdainful of humanity, but forced to train Hal in the ways of the Green Lantern Corps.

"He just cannot believe that humans have a place in the Corps. They are the weak link in the universe," notes Strong. "So consequently, when the ring passes to Hal Jordan, Sinestro cannot deal with it. By the end, Hal earns Sinestro's grudging



respect." According to Strong, that is the arc of the movie — the realisation that human weakness is as precious to the universe as the courage of, say, an inhabitant of Korugar (Sinestro's turf). "I am still the greatest Green Lantern," he smirks, getting into character as a forehead extension is glued in place, cat-eye contact-lenses inserted, and a black wig lined up to give him a vampiric widow's peak.

Sinestro's Hollywood archetype was David Niven, and Strong is adding a touch of his soothing eloquence to his delivery. "Transformation is the most interesting part," he gently Nivens, leaning forward with satisfaction to examine himself in the mirror. "What do you think?" he says, turning to *Empire*. "Of course, the effect is better in my platform boots" — Sinestro is supposed to be six foot seven — "but they're murder to fight in."

For all the complexity of its backdrop, the kind of deep-dish mythology devotees of comics hunger after, there is something old school about *Green Lantern*. Of course, it aspires to the light-headed spirit that Guillermo del Toro, Peter Jackson and James Cameron revel in. The art of the B-movie — silliness taken seriously. But if you're going to hit big, you need to play cool. You have to have your Humphrey Bogart, Han Solo, Indy, Kirk or Hellboy to temper your E.T. David Nivens and Earth-eating blobs of space fear. It's the joy of humans.

"The thing that attracted me so much to Hal Jordan," smiles Ryan Reynolds, before departing to rescue a party from a pinballing helicopter, "was that he was that guy that can punch the bad guy, tell a joke and kiss the girl." You see, *Green Lantern* is only a movie.

➤ *Green Lantern* is out on June 16 and will be reviewed in a future issue.

WHAT ABOUT DEADPOOL?

➤ Ryan Reynolds was due in another superhero franchise

"That's still in the works," insists Reynolds. "I'm not sure how logistically it works in terms of scheduling, but yeah, I want it to happen." Before Hal Jordan, the *X-Men* anti-hero Reynolds played in the *Wolverine* movie was rumoured to be getting a stand-alone movie. *Deadpool*, you'll recall, was the wisecracking, sword-spinning mercenary with accelerated healing.

Robert Rodriguez was in talks to direct a script by *Zombieland* scribes Rhett Reese and Paul Wernick, before the *Los Angeles Times* reported that the unknown Adam Berg was in the box seat. Like Neill Blomkamp, this debutant director's reputation was based on an award-winning short — a one-take heist movie in the vein of *The Dark Knight*, called *Carousel*.

However, with Warner Bros. having already instigated a script for *Green Lantern 2*, it would appear the star's slate is pretty full right now. And wouldn't he also run the risk of clashing superhero brands? "Those two universes are completely different," says Reynolds. "Superhero movies are so pervasive now in pop culture, I don't look at them as superhero roles as much as just roles. They're such different people."

